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ABSTRACT

This study endeavored to extend earlier findings with elementary and college aged students. In earlier studies, conversation orientation was found to play a significant role in helping meet children's parent-child relational expectations and in their satisfaction with family life. Adolescence, with its inherent struggles towards independence and adulthood, provided a more stringent test of these hypotheses. However, once again, conversation orientation was correlated with higher satisfaction with family life and less difference between expected and actual relational behaviors. Even teenagers find being able to talk with parents satisfying to some extent. (Contains 12 references and 5 tables.) (Author/RS)

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Running Head: Adolescent-Parent Relationships

The role of communication in meeting adolescents' relational expectations about the parent-child relationship: Satisfying teenagers

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Abstract

This study endeavored to extend earlier findings with elementary and college aged students. In earlier studies, conversation orientation was found to play a significant role in helping meet children's parent-child relational expectations and in their satisfaction with family life. Adolescence, with its inherit struggles towards independence and adulthood, provided a more stringent test of these hypotheses. However, once again, conversation orientation was correlated with higher satisfaction with family life and less difference between expected and actual relational behaviors. Even teenagers find being able to talk with parents satisfying to some extent.

The role of communication in meeting adolescents' relational expectations about the parent-child relationship: Satisfying teenagers

Previous research about parent-child communication and its association with children's perceptions of the parent-child relationship has shown significant correlations between family communication patterns, how well children feel their relational expectations are met, and children's satisfaction with family life. The present study seeks to extend research completed with elementary and college aged students by filling in the age gap of adolescents.

To that end, we briefly explain theoretical assumptions and propositions upon which this research is based and then summarize past research findings before turning our attention to a review of research on adolescent parent relationships and communication.

Previous Studies of Children's Relational Models

Previous work in this area was based on three assumptions and four propositions. Since these are fully explicated elsewhere (Dixson, 1995), we will offer a succinct explanation here. The foundation of this research is three assumptions about communication and relationships:

1. Relationships occur in the minds of and between the interactants.
2. Relationships are defined, changed, and embodied through interaction.
3. Relationship work is accomplished through routine interaction.

(Dixson, 1995, p. 43)

The first assumption, that relationships occur in the minds of and between the interactants, emphasizes the influence of perceptions on relationships. The behaviors occurring in a relationship are important. The interpretations of behaviors are more important for it is interpretations upon which relational partners base their own responses and behaviors. The second assumption, that relationships are defined, changed, and embodied through interaction, stresses the importance of communication and interaction to the relationship. Relationships do not exist outside the minds and interactions of relational partners. Therefore, it is within interactions that relational change (including creation and demise) occurs. The last assumption, that relationship work is accomplished through routine interaction, highlights the notion that much of what we do in relationships we do without much conscious awareness. We build relationships (especially family relationships) with our everyday routine interactions (conversations about the day, about dinner, about TV shows, etc.). It is these interactions upon which relational partners base much of their beliefs about the relationship. If these routine interactions are negative or simply uncaring, the child will not feel safe and cared for (even if poor routine interactions are punctuated with very positive, special interactions).

For instance, while a child may have a wonderful time with a "favorite uncle" who shows up at Christmas, it is unlikely that the child will turn to this person in times of stress because there is no pattern of being able to count on the "favorite uncle" as concerned and interested in the welfare of the child, even though all interactions with this family member have been positive. The uncle has "routinely" ignored the child.

Given these assumptions about the nature of relationships in general, we turn to some specific propositions, supported by previous research (Dixson, 1995; Dixson

& Stein, 1997), about children's relational models.

Propositions about Relationships and Children

1. Parent-child relationships influence children's relational models; their beliefs and expectations about relationships.
2. Children's subsequent relationships may alter children's relational models.
3. Parents and children influence each other.
4. Relationships that the child forms outside of the parent-child relationship can change the child's relationship model which could, in turn, change the relationship with the parent. Therefore, relationship models become the medium through which the child's various relationships influence each other (Dixson, 1995, p. 47).

Again, these propositions have been more fully argued elsewhere (Dixson, 1993), we offer a brief synopsis here. Essentially, these propositions work together to create a picture of the process that children may undergo in forming judgments and negotiating change in and about the parent-child relationship. We assume that most children begin with a model of parent-child relationships based primarily on what they know, which is their own parent-child relationship. As they grow and are exposed to other kinds of relationships (peers, television families, teachers, friends' parents, etc.) their model of what parent-child relationships are supposed to be may change. When this happens they may attempt (through communication, "rule breaking," or simply trying new behaviors) to change their own parent-child relationship to fit this new model. In short, they try to make their relationship with their parent more like what they think it ought to be. If their attempt is successful (i.e., they can have some say in their

own bedtime if. . .) then they have changed the relationship, including the parents' views on the relationship. If the attempt is not successful, the parent may change the child's views by explaining why the change is not appropriate. In both of the above cases, the model is still consistent with the relationship so the child's expectations are being met. If the relationship does not change but the child is still convinced it should, then you have frustration and expectations not being met (which may often occur in adolescence as children feel they should have more authority and autonomy than parents feel they should have).

Essentially, the "best of worlds" is when a child's model of relationships matches his/her relationship fairly closely. In this instance, a child's relationship is what he/she thinks it is supposed to be. We believe that open family communication (or a conversational orientation) in which family members are allowed to bring up new ideas and negotiate for changes is more likely to be conducive to expectations being met. In such an environment, children are allowed to voice their concerns and listened to. Likewise, parents have the opportunity to explain why some things are not what the child believes they should be and thus influence the child's relational expectations or model.

Research on elementary and college aged children supports these propositions. The more conversation orientation in a family the less difference was reported between elementary children's models of parent-child relationships and their actual parent-child relationship. Conversation orientation and the difference between the model and the experienced relationship accounted for 30% of the variance in these children's reported satisfaction with family life (Dixson, 1995).

Another study found similar results for college students with conversation

orientation and the model-experience relationship match accounting for 53% of variance in their reported family satisfaction (Dixson, & Stein, 1997). From these two studies, it would seem important for children's satisfaction to have a relatively good match between their expectations and experience of the parent-child relationship and that conversation orientation in the family may foster an environment conducive to creating such a match. However, neither the college students nor elementary aged students are likely to disagree with their parents about who should have authority over what areas of the child's life as much as adolescents do. Creating this expectation-experience match may be a much more difficult proposition when dealing with children who are struggling to become (or believe they have already become) adults. It is this crucial time in the child's life that we seek now to explore. First, we look at research about this stormy period in child development.

Adolescents

The role of communication in parent-adolescent relationships

While much research has been done on the developmental period called adolescence, and quite a bit has focused on the parent child relationship, there has been little investigation of the role of communication in this particular relationship. The research that has been done in this area tends to support the supposition that open communication facilitates a healthy relationship in which adolescents can verbalize their changing needs and expectations and these changes can be addressed by responsive parents (Baer, 1999). Good parent-adolescent communication has also been related to more satisfaction, higher cohesion and more adaptability within the family unit (Barnes & Olson, 1985; Olson, Russell, Sprenkly, 1983). Better parent-adolescent communication has even been related to

more successful socializing of adolescents for academic work (Masselam & Marcus, 1990). It would seem then that communication is a key component to adolescents functioning and satisfaction within the family. And, further, that open communication is considered to be "better" communication within this context. Thus, we expected that adolescents, like college students and elementary children, would report their satisfaction with family life was positively related to conversation orientation (open communication):

H_1: Reported satisfaction with family life will be significantly and positively correlated with conversation orientation.

Since communication is the key through which relational models and expectations are negotiated, we expected like elementary and college aged children, that adolescents would report less difference between their model and their experience of the parent-child relationship (meaning relational expectations are being met) when they report higher conversation orientation scores. Thus we posited our second hypotheses:

H2: The difference between children's models and their reports of the actual parent-child relationship will be negatively correlated with reported conversation orientation in family communication.

The changing nature of the parent-adolescent relationship

Adolescence is a particularly stringent test of the assumptions that children negotiate changes in their parent-child relationship via communication. Adolescence is a time of change, a time when children seek to expand their domains of authority and areas of independence. Sometimes these changes are welcomed by parents as appropriate. Other times, such changes are seen as not age appropriate and then

parents and adolescents may conflict over what is acceptable behavior for the parent and for the adolescent. For instance, the adolescent may feel that not only should their curfew be later but that they should be able to set their own curfew. While parents may agree to a later curfew, they may not agree that the adolescent is ready to be responsible for setting his/her own curfew. Adolescents' belief that they should have more responsibility and independence than their parents believe they are ready for is the crux of adolescent-parent negotiations and conflict (Smetena, 1988). This increase in family conflict seems to significantly increase from 6th to 8th grade (Baer,1999) and dissipate in later adolescence (18-21+; Comstock, 1994).

The adolescent's perception of reciprocity within the family plays an important role in this growing process. Adolescents who perceived they had high reciprocity within parent-child relationships were more likely to consult with adults (typically their parents) and to have higher self-esteem than those teens and preteens who did not believe they had reciprocity within the relationship (Winter, Yaffe, & Croley, 1995)

Again, there tended to be a period of disruption with 15-16 year olds as they negotiate a more reciprocal relationship with their parents (Winter, Yaffe, and Croley, 1995) which stabilized with later adolescents. However, earlier research demonstrated that conversation orientation moderates these effects with elementary and college aged students. So, given the findings of Winter, Yaffe and Croley that 15-16 year olds experience disruption and the findings of Baer (1999) that there is an increase in conflict between 6th and 8th grade (8th graders being about 13-14 years old) our third hypothesis was:

H_3: For adolescents reporting low conversation orientation, 13-16 year olds will report a higher MRS score (more difference between expectations and

experience) than younger or older students.

Since the MRS score is related to family satisfaction. Our fourth hypothesis followed:

H_4: For adolescents reporting low conversation orientation, 13-16 year olds will report less family satisfaction than younger or older students.

Methods

Participants

Participants were recruited in a number of diverse ways. First, an email was posted on an electronic general announcements bulletin board at a midwestern university. This bulletin board reaches most faculty and staff. The posting called for teens willing to spend 20-30 minutes filling out survey forms with the promise of $5.00 upon completion. Forty leads were generated in this manner.

A second method for recruiting participants was to have the teen aged children of one of the authors ask their friends who would ask their friends etc. This generated another 15 leads.

Letters were also sent to Youth Directors of local churches explaining the program and asking for volunteers which yielded five more leads.

Altogether sixty packets were sent out to adolescents agreeing to complete the survey forms. Thirty-eight completed survey and consent forms were returned. Eighteen of the thirty-eight received were female, twenty were male. Ages ranged from 11 to 18 with a mean of 14.18.

Instruments

Model of relationships survey. The Model of Relationships Survey (MRS), completed by the adolescents, is modeled after LaGaipa's (1987) friendship behavior

scale which presents a behavior and a seven-point Likert scale ranging from "never" to "always." Teens and preteens were asked to generate five: things parents and children are supposed to do together; things parents are supposed to do for children; things that children are supposed to do for parents; feelings that parents and children are supposed to have for each other; and rules that parents and children should have about the way they act or behave with each other. The scales were designed to cover the behavioral, affective and cognitive components of a relationship. These questions also differentiate between parent as a general societal role and parent as a role in the parent-child relationship. All of the questions asked about behaviors, feelings or rules occurring *between* the parent and the child or on the part of one *towards* the other. Then each participant determined how often each activity (behavior, feeling, rule) should be enacted on a Likert scale.

The Expectation-Experience difference score was obtained by asking the participants to report how often each behavior they had previously generated actually occurs in their own parent-child relationship. In this way, the difference between the child's expectations, beliefs etc. in the model and how well those expectations, beliefs are met/enacted in their own parent-child relationship was quantified.

The MRS was used in a previous study with elementary aged children and achieved a Cronbach's alpha of .72, with college students .84. For this sample, the Model of Relationships Survey obtained an alpha of .63 which may indicate that adolescents have more problems defining the parent-child relationship than either elementary or college aged students.

Family life survey. Family satisfaction was measured by using an adaptation of a Marital Opinion Questionnaire (Huston & Vangelisti, 1991) called the Family Life

Survey. This scale asks how adolescents feel their relationship with their families have been over the last two months. It uses seven-point semantic differentials to measure eight specific items: miserable/enjoyable; hopeful/discouraging; empty/full; interesting/boring; rewarding/disappointing; doesn't give me much chance/brings out the best in me; lonely/friendly; worthwhile/useless. It also includes one global satisfaction item of completely satisfied/completely dissatisfied. This scale has been used with marital couples and achieved alphas ranging from .88 to .94 with correlations between the individual item totals and the global rating from .63 to .80 (Huston & Vangelisti, 1991). In the previous study with young children the eight items yielded an alpha of .80. with college students a .93. For this sample the eight items yielded an alpha of .80. Correlation between the subscale of eight items and the global item was r = .80.

Revised family communication patterns instrument. The adolescents also completed the Revised Family Communication Patterns Instrument (RFCP) (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990) to investigate the degree of conversation orientation they feel exists in their families' communication patterns. The RFCP consists of a set of 26 statements designed to assess the degree of conversation (15 items) and conformity (11 items) orientation of communication in the family. Participants responded by indicating their level of agreement with the statements.

The conversation orientation scale has solid reliability. Ritchie and Fitzpatrick (1990) found a test-retest coefficient ranging from .73 to .93 (p. 531) with alpha reliabilities of .84. The young children's sample achieved an alpha of .76, the college sample an alpha of .91. For this sample the conversation orientation scale yielded an alpha of .86.

Results

H_1: Reported satisfaction with family life will be significantly and positively correlated with conversation orientation.

This hypothesis was supported. Family satisfaction was significantly and positively correlated with conversation orientation ($r = .52$; $p < .001$).

H2: The difference between children's models and their reports of the actual parent-child relationship will be negatively related to the degree of conversation orientation in family communication reported.

This hypothesis was supported. The MRS score was significantly and negatively correlated with conversation orientation ($r = -.50$; $p < .0015$).

As Table 1 shows, regression analysis showed that Conversation Orientation and the MRS score accounted for 23% of the variance in adolescents' reported satisfaction with family life ($F = 6.03$, $p < .001$)

H_3: For adolescents reporting low conversation orientation, 13-16 year olds will report a higher MRS score (more difference between expectations and experience) than younger or older students.

This hypothesis was not supported. The ANOVA (see Table 2) run on three age categories: 11-12, 13-16, and 17-18 for students reporting low conversation orientation (lower than the mean of 49) was nonsignificant ($F = 1.05$; $p < .38$).

H_4: For adolescents reporting low conversation orientation, 13-16 year olds will report less family satisfaction than younger or older students.

Likewise, this hypotheses was not supported. The ANOVA (Table 3) yielded an F of .06 ($p < .94$).

However, Tables 4 and 5 illustrate that a look at the means for the age groups at high and low levels of conversation orientation for both MRS and family satisfaction shows that the means are in the predicted pattern. Thirteen to sixteen year olds report higher differences between exectations and experiences of the parent-child relationship (which are even higher under low conversation orientation conditions) and less satisfaction with family life (which is even lower under low conversation orientation conditions).

Discussion

The relationships between family communication, adolescents' models of the parent-child relationship and their family satisfaction were as predicted and similar to the students in elementary grades and college. Once again we find that as conversation orientation goes up there is a better match between children's expectations and experience of the parent-child relationship and they are more satisfied with their family situation. Open communication allows teenagers to discuss their expectations and receive feedback which can change their expectations or change the behavior within the parent-child relationship.

We also have a very tentative indication that conversation orientation may moderate the conflict and disruption that adolescents and their families undergo during the ages of 13-16. In both high and low conversation orientation groups, 13-16 year olds reported more differences between their expectations and their experience of the parent-child relationship than the other two age groups. They also reported less satisfaction with family life than the other two age groups. However, the 13-16 year olds reporting high conversation orientation in their families were not as unsatisfied as those of the same age reporting low conversation orientation, nor did

they experience as marked a difference between their expectations and their experience of the parent-child relationship. Although, these findings are not significant with this small data set, the means are in the predicted patterns signifying that these variables are certainly worth further investigation and that conversation orientation may be able to amerliorate the disruptive effects of this period of adolescence.

Children of all ages, while needing varying amounts of discipline and guidance, also need to feel they have some control over their lives. Central to those lives are their significant relationships. While many adolescents may not want to admit it, their relationship with their parent(s) is still an important influence on their identity and their happiness. But, it is also the relationship within which they lose much of the control they now feel they have in their peer relationships. Allowing them the opportunity to be heard gives them an outlet for their frustrations which may help alleviate some adolescent angst. Having a conversation orientation within family communication may also aid parents in understanding the sometimes disconcerting behavior of their teens as well. Such understanding may change the interpretation of confusing behaviors.

Limitations

Probably the main limitation in this study is sample size. It is very difficult to get adolescents to take 20 minutes and fill out a survey and then mail it back. Clearly, given the increased disposable income that many adolescents seem to have today, five dollars is not enough incentive.

The second limitation is the low reliability on the MRS for this age group. This could certainly be due to small sample size. But, it is an interesting finding in and of

itself indicating the possibility that this group may have a harder time delineating what the parent-child relationship "ought" to be than did college or elementary students. It may be that their confusion about what the relationship ought to be and the constant changes they feel about who they are leads to inconsistent interpretation of communication messages within the parent-adolescent relationship. Such confusion and inconsistencies may be at the root of the some of the difficulties parents and adolescents have in negotiating new roles with each other. If adolescents are not sure (and parents may be wondering as well!) what the parent-child relational roles are supposed to be, it is difficult to negotiate workable relationships.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study confirms earlier studies with elementary and college aged students. We have found consistently that conversation orientation is correlated with children's relational expectations being met and higher satisfaction with family life. Once again, we see the importance of communication within personal relationships. More importantly, we see the importance of communication to the development of strong parent-child relationships; strong enough to last a life time

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Table 1

ANOVA for Regression Analysis of MRS and Conversation Orientation on Family Satisfaction

N: 37 MULTIPLE R: 0.52 SQUARED MULTIPLE R: 0.27

ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE

SOURCE	SS	DF	MS	F	p
REGRESSION	12.10	2	6.05	6.38	0.001
RESIDUAL	32.26	34	0.95		

Table 2

ANOVA on MRS for age groups given Low Conversation Orientation

ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE

SOURCE	SS	DF	MS	F	p
BETWEEN GROUPS	4.48	2	2.24	1.05	0.38
WITHIN GROUPS	29.96	14	2.14		

Table 3

ANOVA on Family Satisfaction for age groups given Low Conversation Orientation

ANALYSIS OF VARIANCE

SOURCE	SS	DF	MS	F	p
BETWEEN GROUPS	0.18	2	0.09	0.06	0.94
WITHIN GROUPS	22.84	15	1.52		

Table 4

Means of MRS (Difference between expectations and experience) by Age and Conversation Orientation

Age Group

	11-12	13-16	17-18
High Conversation Orientation	Mean: 2.06 N: 5 SD: 1.15	2.84 11 1.75	2.65 3 .64
Low Conversation Orientation	3.31 2 .62	4.31 11 1.56	3.20 4 1.34

Table 5

Means of Family Satisfaction by Age and Conversation Orientation

	Age Group		
	11-12	13-16	17-18
High Conversation Orientation	Mean:5.46 N:5 SD:1.79	5.34 11 .53	6.02 3 .61
Low Conversation Orientation	4.58 3 1.87	4.43 11 1.15	4.66 4 .92

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